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The New Red Menace

Does the Pentagon Hype the Soviet Military Threat?

By Michael Krepon

THERE IS growing evidence of the Reagan administration's misuse of intelligence to portray the Soviet military threat in ways that undermine existing arms-control agreements and expedite the Strategic Defense Initiative. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and his deputy, Richard Perle, have taken the lead in this effort, supported by the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency. The Central Intelligence Agency's professional analysts, in contrast, have refused to bend to the prevailing political winds.

Intelligence disputes within the Reagan administration have become deeply politicized in the area of monitoring nuclear-weapons tests and analyzing Soviet compliance with arms-control agreements. The most significant area of disagreement, however, lies in estimating Soviet strategic-defense efforts. Here, Pentagon officials assert that the Kremlin is deploying a territorial defense prohibited by the Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty, while the CIA estimates the probability of their doing so at 10 percent or less.

Exaggerating the Soviet military threat is a time-honored phenomenon in American politics, especially around budget time. What makes the current situation so disturbing is the extent of, and underlying purpose behind, the misuse of intelligence. At stake is not just modest increases in the Pentagon's budget, but fundamental policy decisions on U.S. nuclear strategy and the fate of existing and future strategic arms-control agreements.

Consider two current examples of disputed intelligence about the Soviets:

■ *Nuclear weapons testing.* Weinberger's most recent annual report to the Congress argued that the American test program shouldn't be curtailed in part because the Soviets had made gains over the United States during the past year in basic technologies associated with nuclear warheads. That's quite a claim, given the fact that during the past year, the Kremlin observed a moratorium on nuclear tests—the best way to test these technologies—while the United States tested 15 times.

There is also a raging dispute about measuring nuclear tests. This dispute underlies the administration's argument that the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty should be ratified only if the Kremlin accepts on-site measurements to prevent it from testing warheads with yields significantly higher than the treaty's 150-kiloton limit.

The ostensible reason for on-site measurements is that seismic monitoring techniques leave a "factor of two" uncertainty in the yields of Soviet underground tests. This means that an underground blast of 150 kilotons could conceivably have an acutal yield around 300 kilotons.

Many non-governmental experts, however, believe that current seismic evaluation methods could lower this uncertainty factor to 1.5; they also doubt that the administration's preferred measurement technique, known as CORRTEX, will lower the uncertainty factor to 1.3, as advertised. Secret CIA documents leaked to the press lend credence to these claims, as agency analysts consider CORRTEX to be deficient and technically unsound. "Frankly," the agency concluded, "if the Soviets said 'yes' to our initial proposals, we would be in trouble."

To further bolster their position against test limitations, Pentagon officials have succeeded in branding the Kremlin a "likely" violator of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty's 150-kiloton limit on underground testing. This conclusion is not supported by the CIA or by the nuclear-weapons laboratories. As Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, recently testified, ". . . the only conclusion possible is that reflected in the old Scotch verdict: Guilt not proven."

■ *Soviet strategic defense.* The most serious misrepresentation of current intelligence, however, is in the area of Soviet strategic-defense efforts, where the Reagan administration asserts that the Soviets "may be preparing an ABM defense of its national territory." This conclusion is a bureaucratic compromise to bridge a dispute between the Office of the Secretary of Defense, which asserts the Soviets are already in the process of constructing such a defense, and the CIA, which believes the probability of their doing so is low and getting lower.

Weinberger goes even further. He now argues that the Russians "have in place the components for a national antiballistic-missile system." The components that require the longest time to build—sometimes five years or more—are large phased-array radars, or LPARS, which are used for battle-management and early warning.

So how many modern battle management radars are the Soviets building? Exactly one—at the Moscow ABM site permitted by the treaty. All the rest under construction, including the Soviet radar improperly sited in its interior, are designed primarily to perform early warning of missile attacks.

The construction of these huge new radars is just one of several pieces of evidence Pentagon officials cite to support their claim that the Kremlim is preparing to break out of the ABM Treaty. Another is the Soviet potential for deploying smaller, rapidly deployable radars as part of a new "ABM-X-3" system. A sketch representing the ABM-X-3 threat appeared in the 1984 edition of "Soviet Military Power." The CIA doubts that such a system exists.

Many questions remain about Soviet compliance practices and strategic-defense efforts that require close scrutiny. Perhaps, as the DIA believes, the Kremlin has secretly produced and stockpiled rapidly transportable radars, is about to deploy newer radars and has successfully tested SAMs in a way that provides confidence in their use against strategic missiles. Perhaps they have deliberately tested warheads over the 150-kiloton threshhold.

It is impossible to prove conclusively that they haven't. But the evidence suggesting that they have is slim. Misrepresentation of this intelligence does a disservice to the president and clouds the difficult strategy and policy choices the nation now faces.

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